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What was his motive then? What was his motive now? . . .

My Compliments To the Cook

by
**JACK
RITCHIE**



I served twelve years and eight months, which is the minimum for parole in this state when one is sentenced to life imprisonment for murder.

When I reached the city, I took a cab to my late Uncle Horatio's residence, now owned and occupied by my cousin Randolph. The taxi turned into the grounds at the gateposts, followed the winding driveway, and stopped at the circle before the big house.

I paid the driver, picked up my zipper bag, and went up the wide stairs to the front door.

A uniformed maid answered my ring. "Yes, sir?"

"I would like to see Randolph Hobart."

"I'm sorry, sir, but he isn't expected home until five."

I nodded. "I will wait for Randolph in the study. I know where it is."

She hesitated a moment before allowing me to enter.

I left her and made my way to the rear of the first floor.

Yes, basically, the study was just about as it had been thirteen years ago. New blinds, perhaps, and, of course, the rug had been replaced. After all, it had been quite messy the last time I saw it. But otherwise the room remained remarkably the same. I pulled open the middle drawer of the big desk, half expecting to find Uncle Horatio's revolver, but it was not there now.

I turned and found an attractive woman studying me. She appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties, with dark hair and cautious eyes.

She would be Randolph's wife, the former Irene Carrollton, and he had married her four years ago. I wondered if cousin Randolph would ever have met her, much less married her, if it hadn't been for the good fortune of Uncle Horatio's death.

"I am Mrs. Hobart," she said. "May I help you?"

I smiled. "My name is James Hobart. Perhaps Randolph has mentioned me now and then?"

She gave that a few seconds' thought. "James Hobart? You wouldn't be the one who. . . ?"

I nodded. "The one who is supposed to have murdered Uncle Horatio? Yes, I am."

Her eyes went to the phone.

I retained my smile. "I have not escaped from prison. I'm on parole. I am here merely to renew old family ties, so to speak. After all, Randolph is still my cousin."

She relaxed slightly. "Actually, Randolph has said almost nothing about you at all beyond the fact that you murdered Uncle Horatio." She moved to the liquor cabinet. "Would you care for a drink?"

When she handed me my brandy, I settled into a chair. "Would you be interested in hearing my version of the murder?"

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"By all means."

I sipped my drink. "It was a warm summer evening. Quite warm, but it rained heavily at ten, cooling things off to some degree, and I stood at my open bedroom window enjoying the new breeze.

"From where I stood I had a clear view across the patio to the windows of this study and I was startled to see Uncle Horatio, revolver in hand, confronting a man wearing a black mask.

"Naturally I ran down the stairs to the first floor and across the patio to join Uncle Horatio. But when I reached the study, I found Uncle Horatio and the masked man struggling for the gun. There was a shot. Uncle Horatio fell and the masked man brushed past me, making for the open French windows. I saw immediately that Uncle Horatio was beyond help—he had been shot cleanly through the heart.

"The gun for which they had been struggling lay beside him. Instinctively I picked it up and ran after the intruder. I pursued him around the corner of the house, emptying the entire revolver in his direction, but evidently I missed him. He disappeared from my sight into the wooded part of the grounds. I continued searching for him, however, until I heard the sound of police sirens coming up the driveway. When I returned to the house, I found the police, Randolph, Anthony, and the servants milling about."

She had been studying me. "Anthony? Oh, yes. Randolph's brother. I never met him. He died in a sports car accident some six years ago. I understand that both Anthony *and* Randolph accused you of shooting Uncle Horatio. They said that they had actually seen you do it."

I nodded.

"They were liars, of course. Anthony maintained somewhat hysterically that it was *he* who had been standing at *his* bedroom window—his room was next to mine—and his attention had been drawn to the study windows where he saw me and Uncle Horatio apparently in an argument. He said that he saw me pull a gun from Uncle Horatio's desk drawer, shoot him, and then rush out into the night firing wildly and shouting to some imaginary person to halt."

"And you still claim that the person you chased was not at all imaginary?"

"He was quite real, I assure you. But Randolph backed up his brother completely. He said he had been taking a walk on the grounds to cool off and was in the vicinity of the tennis courts when he looked

back toward the house. He said that he saw exactly what his brother had seen. To the last detail."

"What motive could they possibly have had for lying?"

"The three of us—Randolph, Anthony, and I—were equal beneficiaries in Uncle Horatio's will and we all knew it. Thirteen years ago, his estate was worth in the neighborhood of three million dollars. I, however, as his convicted murderer, was not allowed to profit by my crime. Therefore Randolph and Anthony split the estate between them. Each got one and a half million dollars."

"And you think that they framed you just so that they would each get an extra half million dollars instead of just one paltry million?" She shook her head. "I suppose it's a motive of sorts, but somehow I feel that they would have been quite satisfied with just one million each rather than going through the risk of trying to frame a cousin just to pick up another half million. They didn't hate you or anything like that, did they?"

"No. On the contrary, we got along rather well."

"There," she said. "Besides, Randolph is quite a moral man. I don't think his conscience could possibly allow him to lie about something as serious as murder."

"Yes," I said. "Randolph was quite a moral man. Did you know that thirteen years ago he entertained the thought of entering the ministry? That was, of course, before he acquired his share—and more—of Uncle Horatio's estate. Evidently having money made him change his mind."

I studied her as she had studied me. Yes, she was quite an attractive woman. Probably the joy of Randolph's life.

She finished her drink. "Are you positive that you are not here for some sort of revenge?"

I smiled. "Revenge? The thought never entered my mind."

Did she find it a bit boring here? I wondered. Would she like to have life just a touch more interesting? Possibly some challenge? Some temptation?

She cocked her head slightly. "How old were you when you went to prison?"

"I had just turned twenty-one. If only Uncle Horatio had been murdered a month earlier, I would have been tried as a juvenile. In those days you legally became an adult only at twenty-one. Who knows how much lighter my sentence might have been?"

Irene did some mental addition. "Twenty-one? That would make you thirty-three today?"

I nodded. "People have always seen me as older than my years. Possibly because I appear to be a bit formal—stuffy, if you like." I smiled again. "But I am not really stuffy, once you get to know me."

Randolph appeared at the study door. He did not seem surprised to see me and so I supposed that the maid had informed him of my presence.

"Good evening, James," he said. "How are you?"

"In quite good health, Randolph."

There were a few moments of silence and then Irene said brightly, "James, you *must* stay for dinner. I believe we're having *Daube de Boeuf Provençale*."

"Ah," I said, "I have been dreaming about that for years."

She met my eyes momentarily. "And you simply must stay at least the night."

"Thank you," I said. "Perhaps I could have my old room? Randolph knows which one it is."

Randolph seemed to sigh. "Of course, James. You're welcome to stay here for . . . for as long as it takes you to adjust to the outside world again."

At dinner that evening, I smiled. "You know, Randolph, the thought just occurred to me that if I hadn't killed Uncle Horatio, today he would be alive and well. And you and I would very likely be junior vice-presidents, or something like that, in his firm and on strained salaries. Uncle Horatio was not exactly generous to a fault."

I helped myself to cucumbers in cream, one of my favorite vegetable dishes. "It makes one think, doesn't it?"

Randolph cleared his throat. "I do hope that your time in prison wasn't too difficult."

"Not at all, Randolph. I adjusted splendidly, knowing that if I behaved, I would almost certainly be out in twelve years and eight months—a bright beacon ahead. I spent twelve of those years behind bars working in the prison library—the last six as Chief Inmate Librarian." I savored the asparagus in plain butter. "Did you know that in twelve years and eight months, we were never served asparagus?"

Irene spoke to me. "The three of you—Randolph, Anthony, and you—lived in this house thirteen years ago?"

“Yes. We were what might be called apprentices to Uncle Horatio. He made his millions as a plumbing contractor and he was initiating us into the business.”

Later in the evening, Randolph and I moved alone to the study.

He shifted a bit. “James, have you come here for some *particular* reason?”

I selected a cigar from the humidor. “Randolph, do you remember my description of the intruder I claimed killed Uncle Horatio?”

“You mentioned that he wore a mask.”

“Yes, a mask. But besides that I also described him as being approximately my size and weight.”

“I suppose you did. I don’t really remember.”

“Randolph, during the course of your life, you must have noticed that all three of us—you, and Anthony, and I—were the same height and weight?”

“What are you getting at, James?”

I lit the cigar. “Thirteen years ago, you claimed that you had been at the tennis courts when you looked back toward the house and saw me shoot Uncle Horatio. You said you saw me rush out of the study, chasing an imaginary intruder around the corner of the house and firing the revolver into the air. You also said you immediately rushed across the grounds to the scene of the murder.”

His chin became a bit stubborn. “Yes.”

“Randolph, there is no path leading directly from the tennis courts to the house. Did you run across the lawn?”

“Yes,” he said quickly. “That’s what I did.”

“But Randolph, it had been raining that night and the grass was still wet—and rather high. Your shoes, not to mention the bottoms of your trouser legs, should have been thoroughly saturated with water. But I remember distinctly that they were dry. Dry, Randolph, *dry*.”

His eyes clouded for a moment of reflection, but he said nothing.

I sighed. “Unfortunately for me, the significance of that entirely escaped me at the time. But lying in my cell year after year and going over what happened again and again, the importance of the dry shoes and trousers finally struck me. You lied to the police, Randolph. You did not witness the murder at all. You were not at the tennis courts.”

He flushed. “When the so-called significance of all this struck you, why didn’t you tell it to the authorities?”

I shook my head. "Come now, Randolph. Five years after the murderer could I really go to the police and say, 'I'm sorry, but just at this moment I suddenly remembered that my cousin's shoes and trouser bottoms were dry when they should have been wet.' What corroboration would I have? Would anyone else at the scene have noticed, much less remembered, the condition of your shoes and trousers?"

He regarded me carefully. "In other words, you have absolutely no real proof that I was lying?"

"Absolutely none, Randolph. You got away with it completely."

He flushed a bit.

I let a few moments pass.

"Why did you lie, Randolph? Was it because that was really *you* underneath that mask?"

He sputtered. "That is absolutely ridiculous."

I watched him. "But then why did you lie, Randolph?"

He avoided my eyes.

I took a slow puff on my cigar. "Perhaps I can help you, Randolph. We both know what Anthony was like. Spoiled, unstable, a compulsive gambler. He was deeply in debt and he was being pressed by his creditors. I know because he came to me and asked for a loan of \$10,000, but, of course, I had no money to give him. I imagine that you didn't either. Then, in desperation, did he approach Uncle Horatio? And certainly Uncle Horatio must have turned him down. Did he, perhaps, even threaten to cut Anthony out of his will entirely for incurring such a large gambling debt?"

Randolph did not meet my eyes.

I put down my cigar. "It was *Anthony* behind that mask. When I pursued him, he lost me and doubled back to the house. Perhaps he thought that I might have somehow discovered that it was him under the mask and decided that attack was the best defense. He got to the police first with a story about seeing *me* murder Uncle Horatio, hoping that it would blunt any accusation I might make."

Randolph glared at me. "What makes you so certain that it was Anthony behind the mask?"

"Anthony claimed that he witnessed the murder from his bedroom window and then rushed downstairs, across the patio, to the study. The patio is tiled and well-drained. And yet Anthony's shoes and the bottoms of his trousers were quite wet—as wet as though he had been

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running outside in the tall grass."

Randolph turned away.

I sighed. "Randolph, I don't believe for one moment that you deliberately tried to frame me. I'm certain that you would have preferred to blame some stranger, some intruder, for the murder, but your brother had already committed himself with his story to the police. You may have had some doubts about what he said because you knew how desperately he needed money. You also realized that if the police ever began to doubt his story, they would investigate further. They might even test his hands for gunpowder grains. You wanted to protect Anthony, because he was, after all, your brother, and you felt that the best way to do that was to quickly corroborate whatever he said and hope that it was really true."

Randolph moved to the window and stared out. "Mind you, I am admitting nothing. I believe that Anthony must have seen you murder Uncle Horatio. Or perhaps he saw someone who *looked* like you. Yes, that was possibly it." He wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "It is just remotely possible that Anthony did make a mistake. In which case you might really be . . ."

He put the handkerchief away. "Actually, I've always been rather fond of you, James. Respected you, and all that, and I found it hard to believe that you would murder anyone for money. I mean that it never seemed to mean that much to you. However, when Anthony said that . . ."

He squared his shoulders. "Frankly, I've been thinking over my part in all of this and . . . Well, there is no way to give you back thirteen years. However . . ." He turned to face me. "Anthony ran through every cent he inherited. He was broke when he died in that auto accident." He cleared his throat. "However, I have done fairly well. Fairly. Your rightful share of Uncle Horatio's estate would have been one million dollars. Would it help to ease the years of . . . I mean would it settle accounts—for both Anthony and me—if I arranged for the transfer of one million dollars to your account?"

I smiled.

"Randolph, you are more than generous."

The fact is, of course, that I did indeed murder Uncle Horatio and the event occurred just as Anthony had described it.

Uncle Horatio and I had had a violent quarrel—the subject being Winifred, the downstairs maid. She was a quiet girl who had attracted me and I had decided to ask her to marry me.

When I informed Uncle Horatio of my plans, he coldly informed me that the marriage was impossible—I was marrying below my station in life.

I reminded him that I had no station, and besides, since when had plumbing contractors been elevated to the peerage? At which point, he informed me that he was cutting me out of his will.

When I informed him, quite graphically, what he could do with his money, he turned vicious, saying things about Winifred which I could not possibly allow.

I was young then. Just past twenty-one. I lost my head completely, pulled the revolver from the desk drawer, and shot Uncle Horatio dead.

The shock of the murder immediately brought me back to my senses, and, among other things, I discovered that I was not at all eager to go to prison for his death.

My first thought was of simply fleeing the room and hoping that some intruder—some burglar—would be blamed for Uncle Horatio's death.

But then I realized that the police would most surely have their suspicions. They would make tests to determine if anyone in the household had gunpowder grains on his hands.

How could I explain those on mine? Even if I had the time to wash my hands, I had read that removing all traces of gunpowder is nearly impossible.

If I had had more time to think, I might have come up with something better, but I felt certain that the shot had been heard and I was forced into immediate action. I was left with no alternative but pretending to chase the supposed murderer and firing the gun into the air. That, at least, would be one way of explaining the powder grains on my hands.

I did not know at the time that Anthony had witnessed the entire incident from his bedroom window. And, of course, I had no reason to disbelieve Randolph when he said that he had also seen the crime being committed from the tennis courts.

So I went to prison resigned to my fate. I allowed the world to be-

lieve that I had killed Uncle Horatio for his money. There seemed to be no point in dragging Winifred into the mess.

As for the condition of anyone's shoes or trousers, I haven't the faintest recollection to this day whether they were wet or dry.

What did eventually occupy my thoughts, however, was the coincidence of having two people at two different points witnessing the murder, and the further coincidence that they just happened to be brothers.

I pondered upon that at some length. Was it at all possible that one of them had lied about actually seeing the murder committed?

And if one of them had lied, *why* had he lied?

Was it because he wanted to make certain that I would be out of the way so that he could split my share of Uncle Horatio's estate with his brother? Frankly, I found it hard to believe that either Anthony or Randolph would stoop to something like that.

I turned to another possibility.

Granting that Anthony had seen the crime committed, he had then blurred his story to the police. Randolph had believed him, of course, and yet, at the time, Anthony had been a bit hysterical. If the police questioned him further, would Anthony go to pieces?

What harm would it do if Randolph simply bolstered his brother's story by declaring that he too had witnessed the crime? After all, he *did* believe that his brother had seen me commit the murder, and why should Anthony be subjected to an ordeal by the police? It might only lead to a breakdown of sorts. After all, Anthony wasn't really too stable as it was.

And yet, as the years passed, did some small doubt begin to gnaw at Randolph? Did he possibly approach Anthony with his doubts? And had Anthony so vehemently declared that he had indeed seen me commit the crime that it had only served the opposite purpose of reinforcing Randolph's doubts?

And did this uncertainty bother him enough so that I could touch him for a ten- or twenty-thousand-dollar rehabilitation loan when I got out of prison?

It seemed worth a try and I had hit the jackpot.

When I left Randolph in the study, I took a bottle of brandy and two glasses up to my room.

I waited and at ten o'clock there was a knock at my door.

It was Winifred.

She had been the downstairs maid at the time of the murder and today she was the cook. While I had been in prison, she had seen me every visitor's day for nearly thirteen years.

She had been eighteen then. She was thirty-one now and the only woman I had ever loved or ever would.

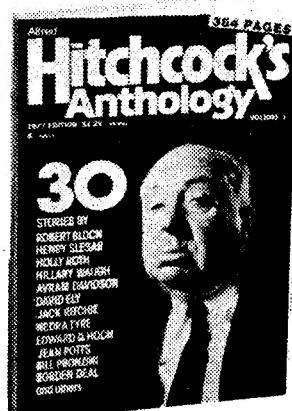
She smiled. "How did everything go?"

"Better than my wildest expectations."

It had been a long, long time since I had been alone with Winifred.

I locked the door.

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